

Skill-Building Opportunities

Sleepover Fears

Question: My daughter is afraid to go on sleepovers, even at a family member's house. How can I help her build up her courage?

As your child becomes more independent, there are inevitable challenges and stresses. There are many things you can do to help your daughter manage her feelings in difficult situations by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

According to Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, it is important not to shield children from everyday stresses. She says,

A childhood that had no stress in it would not prepare you for adulthood. If you never allow your child[ren] to exceed what they can do, how are they going to learn to manage adult life—where a lot of it is managing more than you thought you could manage? A normal childhood has challenges in it... and we need to help our children understand how to manage themselves, but not protect them completely from those challenges.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1 Talk to your child.

Start by having a conversation with your child. Ask her to tell you about the things that make her nervous or scared when she sleeps at a different house. Begin by saying something like:

- “I noticed that it seems hard for you to sleep away from home. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how sleepovers make you feel.”
- “Why do you think you feel scared? Are there certain things that make you nervous?”

By showing your child you take her feelings seriously, you are helping her feel secure and cared for. Once you begin a discussion, it will be easier for you to work together to come up with a plan for your child to use for Taking on Challenges like sleeping away from home.

A study by Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota revealed that when children had control over a toy that scared them—being able to turn it off or on—they were more likely to enjoy the experience. On the other hand, if they didn't have control, they were more fearful.

2 Make a plan.

An important part of Taking on Challenges is being able to problem solve in order to manage fears. Work together with your child to come up with a plan to help her manage during sleepovers. When you do this, you help your child feel a sense of control while giving her tools to manage stressful situations. Eventually, she will use these tools on her own. The following are

some ideas for sleepover strategies:

- Ask your child what ideas she has to be able to manage sleepovers. Write down all of her ideas and go over what you and she think would work or not work about each one. Then select one to try.
- After she has tried out her idea, talk about what worked and what didn't work. If needed, go through the process again to select a new plan to try.

Here are some other suggestions that might be helpful in managing sleepovers.

- Help your daughter transition into spending a full night away. Have her spend an evening away at first and then try a full night. Or, you could have a group sleepover at a family member's house.
- Don't make her stay if she becomes genuinely distressed. As she is learning to be away from home, plan the sleepover close enough to your home so that you can pick her up if absolutely necessary. If you pick her up, remind her that she can try another time and that you have every confidence that she will learn to enjoy sleepovers soon.
- Does your child have a special object like a small toy or piece of clothing? Have her bring it with her to remind her of home and to help her feel calm and safe.
- Does your child use a nightlight? Give her a small flashlight to keep with her on sleepovers.
- Encourage your child to bring along a favorite book to read or music to listen to before she goes to sleep.
- Suggest that your child bring a picture of a family member or pet that might help her feel better if she puts it under her pillow.

3 Use relationships as a stress-buster.

Taking on Challenges also means learning to look to others for help. Your relationship with your child acts as the ultimate stress-buster.

Remind your child that she can always call you if she starts to feel sad or scared. You can try to support her over the phone and remind her of the strategies that she has to help her on her sleepovers.

Carol Dweck from Stanford University did a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks like those found on intelligence tests that became increasingly difficult. This study ultimately led to her theory of mindsets. She found that the children in the study who "wilted" in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities and intelligence as unchangeable; they had a fixed mindset. The students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop: they had a growth mindset. Dweck also found that children praised for their efforts instead of their intelligence chose to take on harder tasks that they could learn from.

4 Praise your child's efforts.

When children are praised for their effort and for the strategies they're using, they're more likely to want to learn and to try harder. Your support promotes a growth mindset in your child, telling her to keep going, even when things are difficult or stressful.

- Encourage your child's resilience or her ability to keep trying, even if she has not been successful. Say things like: "You stayed almost the whole night at grandma's house! I knew you could do it."
- Acknowledge when your child uses problem-solving strategies: "I'm so glad that the flashlight helped you when you woke up in the middle of the night."

Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley has done research on what he calls "social referencing"—the tendency that we all have to look to others for information about how to respond to potentially stressful experiences. In one of Campos' studies, an experimenter told parents to look either frightened or encouraging as their children tried something new and a little scary—communicating just with their faces and no words. When parents looked fearful, the children would not try the new experiences. On the other hand, when parents smiled and nodded, the children would take on the challenge.

5 Be aware of how you convey your stress.

Even as your child gets older, she still looks to you for information about the world and how to behave.

- Think about your own reactions to your child's stress. Are you sending messages of confidence or of frustration?
- Share your own problem-solving strategies for dealing with situations that make you feel nervous like: "Sometimes when I have to meet someone new at work, I close my eyes and take deep breaths. That helps me calm down."